

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE BELLS

A CLIMB up the perpendicular iron ladder fixed against the tower wall brings you through a narrow trap-door into a small chamber. From here another short climb, then a scramble over massive woodwork, and you are at the top of the tower amongst the bells in the octagon, with the wind blowing keen and chill through the louvres of the unglazed windows.

The bells are five in number, and are hung in two tiers, two above and three below, the smallest being No. 1 and leading up to No. 5, the big tenor bell. From their inscriptions we know the date when they were cast, and from the names upon them we can tell that they are Northamptonshire bells, cast in the county by Northamptonshire men. The following are the inscriptions on the various bells; the figures giving the date of the casting:

1. CANTATE DOMINO CANTICVM NOVVM. 1686.  
(This is the Latin for "O sing unto the Lord a new song," the opening words of Psalms xcvi. and cxlix.) The figures give the date of the casting. In diameter, this bell is 30 inches.

2. HENRY BAGLEY MADE MEE. 1686. Diameter 32 inches.

3. MATTHEW BAGLEY MADE MEE. 1686. Diameter 34 inches.

4. HENRY BAGLEY MADE MEE. 1686. Diameter 36 inches.

5. EDWARD DRY AND STEPHEN MILES. CHURCHWARDENS. 1686. O. Diameter 40 inches.

The Edward Dry, churchwarden, commemorated on the big bell, succeeded his father as lord of the manor and was buried November 19th, 1707. Stephen Miles was the son of a benefactor of the parish. See page 265.

The Bagley family were bellfounders of Chalcombe, in Northamptonshire, so we read in *The Church Bells of Northamptonshire*, by Thomas North, F.S.A. Matthew Bagley, of that village, a blacksmith by trade, died in 1649, leaving two sons, Henry, who was born in 1608, and John, who was born in 1618. Henry became the first bellfounder there, and opened his foundry about 1632. He died about 1676, and was succeeded by his two sons Henry and William, and his nephew Matthew, the son of his brother John. Their names are not found together on any single bell, but their individual names appear on different bells in the same ring or peal cast by them.

There were bells in Milton Church long before 1686, and it is probable that the date they now bear tells us when they were recast. In those days, we know it was the custom in most places for men to mount to the bell-chamber and strike the bells with sledge-hammers instead of ringing them, and what was done in other places may

have been done at Milton. Cracked and dented by being badly used, their pealing was inharmonious until they were melted down and recast, once more made tuneful and ready to "sing unto the Lord a new song."

Milton people have always had a warm affection for the bells of their parish church. In Pre-Reformation times bequests were made in money or kind for their maintenance.

Lawrence Davey 1526. "Item to the bellis in the same churche halffe a quarter barley."

Henry Davies, 1536. "Also I give to the use of the bells iiijd."

Nicholas Byllyng 1545. "Item I bequeth to ye bells iiijd."

Alice Campyan 1546. "Item I bequath to ye mayntenynge of ye bells iiijd."

Thomas Johnson 1552. "I bequethe to the repacon<sup>1</sup> of the bells a strike of barley."

Wm. Garnett, 1576. "I geve to the repaire of the bells of Milton iiijd."

A search through the Wills of Milton people will furnish evidence that some made bequests not only to the bells of their own church, but also, because the parishes were intermixed, to those of the sister church of Collingtree, and some Collingtree people on their death repaid the compliment :

John Smythe of Collingtroughe, 1557, "Also I geve to the mayntenance of the belles of Collingtrey viijd also I geve to the belles of Mylton viijd."

<sup>1</sup> Reparation or repair.

Several old customs in the use of the bells are still observed at Milton.

Upon a death, the great tenor bell is rung out, three strokes for a man and five for a woman. Then the age is given, the number of strokes being the years the deceased had lived, so by this means the villagers can give a reasonable guess as to who has passed away. After a slight pause, the bell is then tolled for some minutes.

With regard to the "three for a man," according to North's account the older custom at Milton was three times three, a slight pause occurring after each third stroke. The old saying that "nine tailors make a man," considered derogatory to those who provide us with our Sunday clothes, has really nothing to do with the knights of the needle. It should be "nine tellers mark a man," the "tellers" being the strokes of the death bell. And why the nine, or three times three? In my opinion, we must go back to Pre-Reformation times for the reason. During the Mass, i.e. the Holy Communion, at the time of consecration the tenor bell was rung three times at the elevation of the Host, three times at the elevation of the Chalice and three times at the close of the consecration prayer. The broken bread being the Body of Christ and the outpoured wine His precious Blood, signified the Death of Our Lord, and thus the "three times three" of the Mass became the "nine tellers" that mark a man, otherwise signify his death.

On Shrove Tuesday, the shriving bell is still rung at 11 o'clock in the morning, the bell used

from time immemorial being No. 3. "Shrive" is an old Saxon word for confession to a priest, and as the week before Lent seems to have been specially marked for confession of sins, we therefore have Shrove Tuesday, or Confession Tuesday. The rector would await the penitents in church, and to let them know he was ready a bell was rung. In this way originated the Shrove Tuesday bell. It is now called the "pancake bell," and it may possibly have been so called in days of yore, but what have pancakes to do with Shrove Tuesday and the confession of sins? Nothing at all, except that next day Lent, the great season of fasting, would be ushered in, when there must be no meat eaten and no rich foods. This meant that all fats, such as butter, lard and dripping, had to be used up, so the housewife made pancakes and other rich delicacies to be eaten the same day. Hence the 11 o'clock shriving bell became also the signal for the preparation of pancakes, and so might well have been known even in those far-off days as the "pancake bell." In *Poor Robin's Almanac*, published in 1684, we read:

"But hark, I hear the pancake bell,  
And fritters make a gallant smell."

On the three last Mondays in Advent, peals are rung on the bells before sunrise, usually about half-past five. Thomas North in *The Church Bells of Northamptonshire* mentions this practice in some other villages, but does not include Milton. This must have been an oversight on his part, for old ringers have told me

that the early morning Advent ringing was customary here long before 1878, when North published his book. The custom probably originated through St. Paul's exhortation in the Epistle for Advent Sunday: "Now it is high time to awake out of sleep."

At noon a bell is still rung daily, the one used being No. 2. It is commonly called the "dinner bell," as it summons the labourers home from the fields to their midday meal. Quite possibly this is a survival of a Pre-Reformation Angelus rung at midday, for that religious custom would have its secular value as a signal of time when there was no clock. On the other hand our "dinner bell" may be of purely secular origin, though possibly in use for centuries.

The church bell being found so convenient a signal for workmen prompted a more frequent use of it, for we find it was rung at Milton no less than four times daily. In the minute books of the Public Vestry of Milton the following resolution is recorded:

"1829. Thursday, March 5th. John Cherry to ring the Bell for the Labourers to return from Breakfast at half past eight o'clock in the morning."

John Cherry had already been ringing the bell at other times, as the following month it is recorded he was paid wages for so doing.

"1829. Thursday, April 2nd. John Cherry to have a pair of shoes, and five shillings given him for ringing the Bell at eight, half-past eight, twelve and one o'clock."

John Cherry seems to have been the general factotum of the parish, as his name occurs frequently in the Churchwardens' Accounts. At any rate, he must have done his work very well for his wages were raised, as under date October 1st of the same year we read :

“ John Cherry to have 7/9 for the half year for ringing the bell &c.”

At what time the bell was discontinued as a signal for the workmen, except at noon, it is impossible to decide, as the entries are rather vague, but it was probably when the striking clock was put up in 1863.

At times of national rejoicing or mourning our bells have patriotically given tongue. In this respect the following extracts from the Churchwardens' Accounts are of interest :

1820. Apl. 18th. Paid Richard Robinson for tolling the Bell at the King's funeral	2/-
1827. Feb. Paid the ringers for a dumb Peal and Tolling the Bell the day the duke of York was buried.	3/6
1830. July 15th. Paid Richd. Robinson for tolling the bell at the King's Funeral	2/-
1861. Richard Robinson for Tolling Bell, Prince Consort's Funeral	2/-
1862. Ringers (on Prince of Wales's Marriage)	10/-

The bells were also rung at the Jubilee and Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, the Coronation of King Edward VII and of his son George V, and the last time on a national occa-

sion in joy and thankfulness when the Armistice was signed on Monday, Nov. 11th, 1918.

Some of the accounts prove quaint and instructive reading.

1803. Apl. 12th. Pd. new set of Bell Ropes . . . . .	£1	7	0
1805. Feb. 13th. Pd. Jno. Fox for repairing the Bells, for new brasses & lining the gudgeons . . . . .	£5	5	6
1806. May 23rd. Pd. James Palmer Bell Role . . . . .		1/-	
1834. July 17th. Menden a bell rope . . . . .			6d.
1834. Sept. 20th. Shuting a bell Rope . . . . .			3d.

Being in such frequent use, the bells have from time to time required attention. Among the Vestry Minutes we find the following resolution as to their condition :

1847. April 5th. " That a competent person be forthwith engaged by the Church Wardens to put them in a state of safety and repair."

Fifty years afterwards they were again attended to and rehung in time for the celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria.

The subject of the bells must not be left without a word as to the hand-bells that are in the charge of the captain of the belfry. They are ten in number, the ringers using them one in each hand, and with such a range of notes they are able to play many melodies, with which they give much delight at Yuletide.

The last team of ringers was depleted by some



leaving the village. They rang together for the last time at the Armistice, and their names were :

Charles Tack (Captain), Samuel James Turner, William Stockford, Arthur Robinson and William Clarke.

In the spring of 1921 a new team was formed. By diligent practice they have so mastered the art that their performance is a source of delight to all who love the sound of the bells.

It is a noteworthy fact that on Thursday, March 8th, 1923, just two years after the band had been formed, they rang a peal of Doubles, 5,040 changes, at Milton in three hours and sixteen minutes, being 30 six-scores of Grandsire and 12 of Plain Bob. The peal was conducted by Mr. John A. Townsend and not only was it the first recorded peal on our bells, but the first recorded peal by a local band, all being natives of Milton. The names of these enthusiastic devotees are :

Albert Turner (1), Charles Yates (2), John A. Townsend (Captain) (3), Raymond Asplin (4), Philip Asplin (5) and Willie Stockford, supernumerary.

Long may they flourish and speed by their art the message of the bells.

“ Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,  
The flying cloud, the frosty light :  
The year is dying in the night ;  
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,  
Ring, happy bells, across the snow :  
The year is going, let him go ;  
Ring out the false, ring in the true.”